

The Monasteries of Alcobaça and Batalha are related to important events in Portuguese political history: Alcobaça to the birth of Portugal; Batalha to its continuity as an independent nation.

Our first King, Don Afonso Henriques, personally commissioned St. Bernard to build the Cistercian Monastery of Alcobaça in 1153. Don Afonso provided the land between the Alcoa and Baça rivers but also gave Bernard a large amount of land extending to Óbidos and Muel, near the sea. Such a gift to this prestigious exponent of Christianity permitted Don Afonso to obtain, from the Pope, his own coronation and the recognition of the Portuguese kingdom, but it also assured the settlement and economic prosperity of the territory, as these monks were experts in agriculture (Figure 1). Alcobaça was chosen to immortalize Portugal's most beautiful love story, the passion between Pedro and Inês. This is a political story as well as a romance, as D. Pedro's father ordered Dona Inês murder because she was Castilian. We can see their superb genuine Gothic tombs in each side of the transept, facing each other... legend has it that the lovers are placed like that because they want to see each other when they awake.

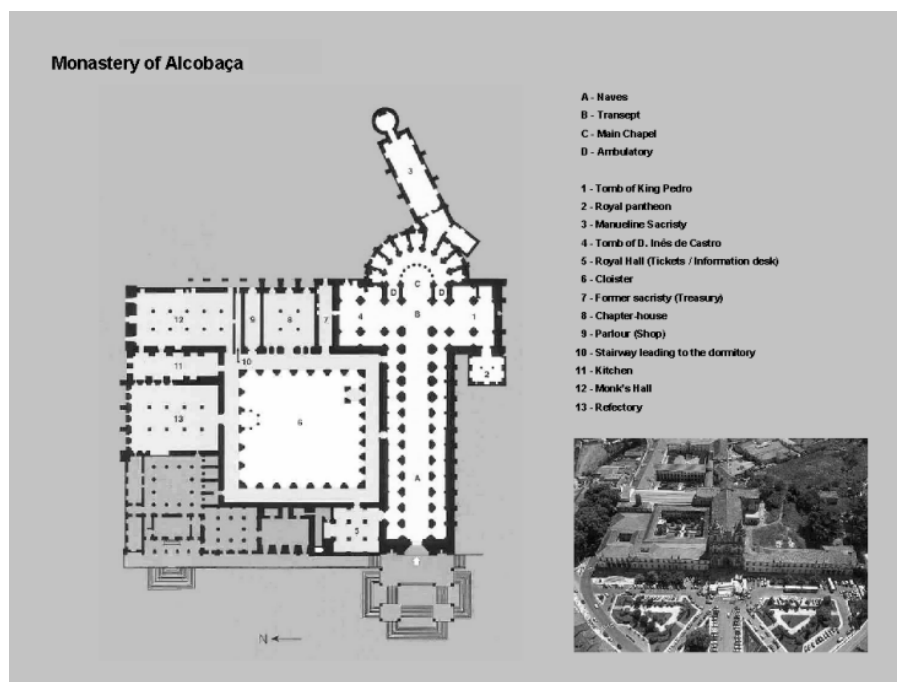


Fig. 1. The plan of the Monastery of Alcobaça

On the other hand the Dominican Monastery of Batalha signals the beginning of the second dynasty, which followed the social-political upheaval of 1383-85, a result of the victory against Castile. King Don João I promised the Virgin Mary that he would undertake its construction near the battlefield in case of victory (Figure 2).

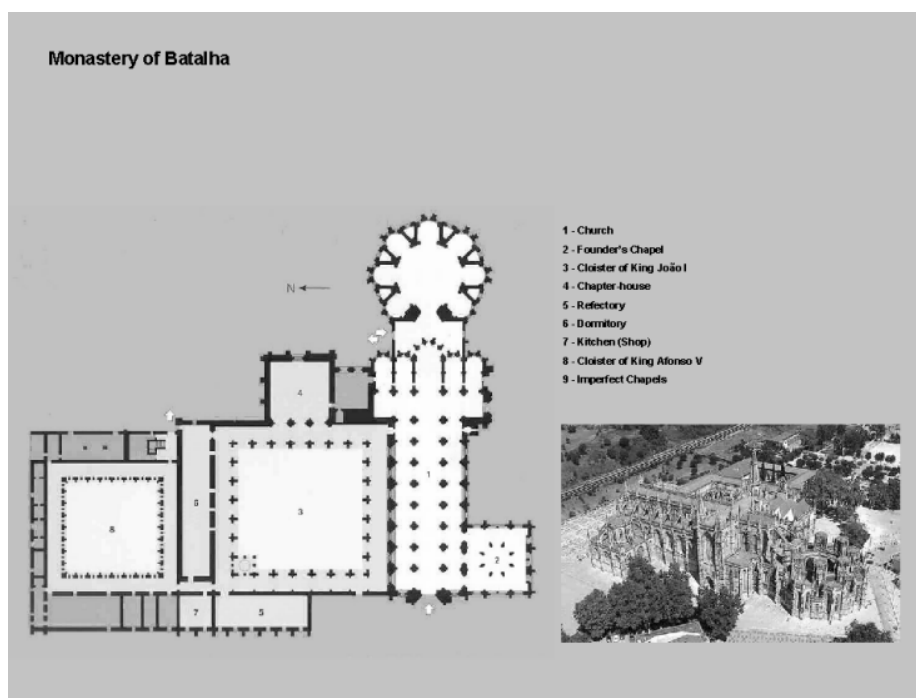


Fig. 2. The plan of the Monastery of Batalha

Both Monasteries are huge buildings, best representative of each dynasty apart from some military constructions. The church of the Monastery of Alcobaça is almost an exact reproduction of the one from Clairvaux. The entire monastery is in fact very similar to the model, which allows us to consider its Cistercian Gothic architecture, here transcribed in white stone, as an example of “international style” of that time. In our territory we had nothing of such scale and quality. We were still making the small Benedictine three aisled churches that can be found all over the country, the latest ones revealing some timid signs of the Gothic (Figure 3). Even the cathedrals from the most important cities—Braga, Porto and Coimbra—were not as large and well built as Alcobaça.

After this building nothing could be the same, but its influence was felt very slowly. Gradually the Benedictine plan was replaced with the Mendicant one, to which it is typologically related (Figure 4). In some way this order played the same role in the settlement from the centre to the south of the territory as the Benedictines did from the north to the centre, although the Mendicants were more concerned with urban areas. In

the Mendicant temples, although there are still the three naves covered, in general, with a wooden structure, we have much more continuity between them as the piers became more slender and the arches larger. We have also more light inside, mainly in the presbytery and side chapels, which are the only vaulted spaces, where we see the characteristic ribbed structure of the Gothic with its narrow but high windows in between.

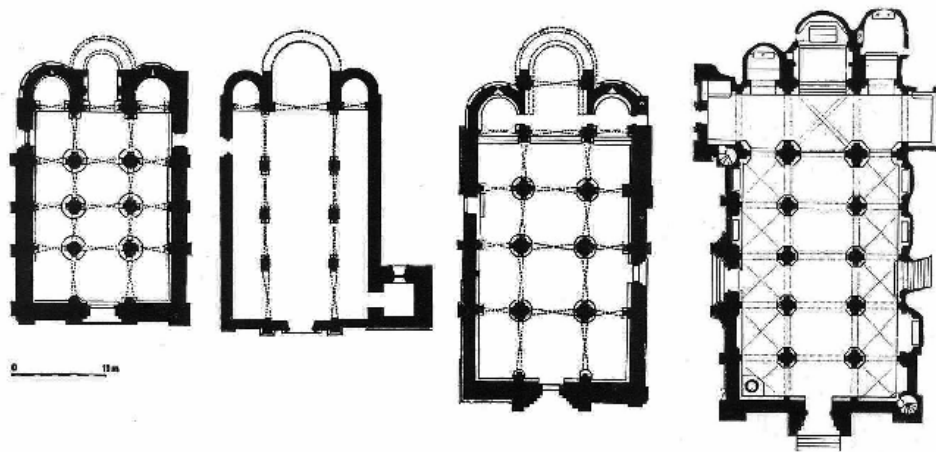


Fig. 3. Benedictine plans of Travanca, Gandei, Paço de Sousa and of Coimbra's Cathedral, twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Batalha is inscribed in this tradition but its proportions and stoned vaulted spaces make it an exceptional example. It's deeper and most of all it's higher! (Figure 4). Here the Gothic verticality becomes a fact and, of course, we have all over the temple the light flowing in through large stained glass windows, now made possible by the accuracy of the constructive system.

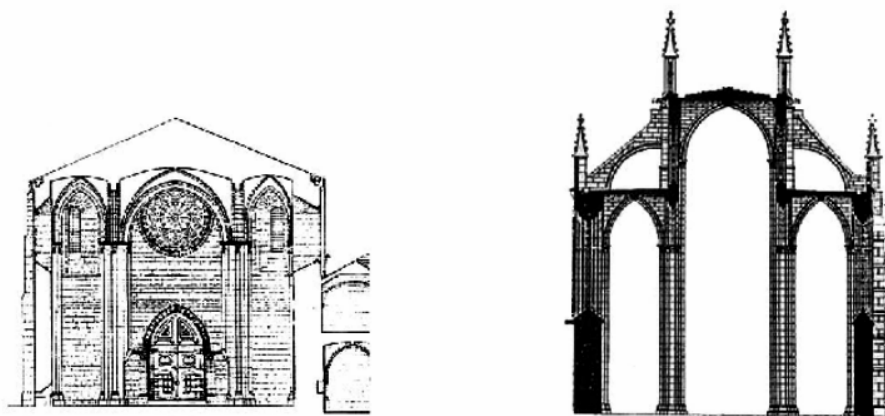


Fig. 4. Sections of the churches of Alcobaca (left) and Batalha (right)

The conformance to the Mendicant plan in the church and the resemblance to the Cistercian monastery plan were already present in the first project due to Mestre Afonso Domingues. Legend has it that he stood for three days and three nights under the Chapter House vault (a square plan measuring 19 meters to a side), which everybody thought could not hold and would fall down as had the one attempted by Mestre Huguet, the young builder from foreign lands who replaced him in the works. Old, blind and tired, but proud of his achievement where his rival failed, the Portuguese master said just before dying: “Esta abóbada não caiu, esta abóbada não cairá!” (“This vault hasn’t fallen down, so this vault never will fall down!”) (Figure 5).



Fig. 5. Mestre Afonso Domingues, architect of the vaults at the Monastery of Batalha, in a stone boss

Actually, contrary to the legend, it seems it was Huguet who in fact finished the Chapter House, as well as the vaults of the presbytery, transept and central nave. He also created the Founder’s Chapel for the King when he finally decided to be buried there with all his family. In spite of his advanced solutions to some technical problems, Huguet charged the primitive structure with a rich flamboyant decoration, which in any case doesn’t detract from the clarity of the plan. This Baroque tendency of late Gothic assumed a proto-Manuelin character in the impressive Unfinished Chapels, a central-plan space surrounded by small chapels, located behind the main altar. It was planned to be Don Duarte’s mausoleum. After that, Don Afonso V, perhaps longing for the purity of the Cistercian architecture, which was nearer to the austerity of Mendicant ideas, reacted to all this hyper-decorativism and commissioned the minor cloister and the dependences around it, where we can easily find this desired simplicity. Nevertheless the triumph of the exuberant Manuelin style was still coming from the hand of Mateus Fernandes, who left us the decorative fascias of the main cloister arches and the astonishing portal of Don Duarte’s mausoleum (Figure 6). These Chapels were to remain unfinished as the interests of King Don Manuel turned to Lisbon and the new Jerónimos’ Monastery.



Fig. 6. The Manueline-style portal of the Unfinished Chapels, a central-plan space surrounded by small chapels, located behind the main altar of the church of Batalha

Mateus Fernandes is buried in Batalha, at the church entrance. There is an indication near by stating that he was the monastery architect. But this is not fair: Mestre Afonso Domingues was the first one. And, in spite of all the scientific evidence, the legend will never fall down!

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About the Author

João Pedro Xavier received his degree in Architecture from the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Porto (FAUP) and is licensed as an architect at the College of Architects in Porto since 1986. He worked in Álvaro Siza's office from 1986 to 1999; at the same time he set up his own practice. He has taught geometry since 1985 at Architecture School of Cooperativa Árvore in Porto, Fine Arts School of Porto and since 1991 at the FAUP. In 1996 he wrote *Perspectiva, perspectiva acelerada e contraperspective*, published by FAUP Publicações at 1997, and became assistant lecturer of that Chair. He is now preparing his Ph.D. on the same subject. Xavier has always been interested in the relationship between architecture and mathematics, especially geometry. He published several works and papers on the subject, made conferences and lectures and gave courses to high school teachers. He also collaborated with the Ministry of Education coordinating the team in charge of the elaboration of Descriptive Geometry curricula in Portugal.